

REDUCING THE RISK OF FOODBORNE ILLNESS

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The decade of the 1990's witnessed many reforms in government programs and policies designed to reduce the risk of foodborne illness in the U.S. population. These reforms included:

- requiring safe handling labels on raw meat and poultry in 1993,
- establishing CDC's active foodborne disease surveillance activity called FoodNet in 1994,
- establishing the Office of the Under Secretary for Food Safety in USDA in 1994,
- issuing the seafood HACCP rule in 1995,
- passing the Safe Drinking Water Act and the Food Quality Protection Act in 1996,
- implementing the Pathogen Reduction and HACCP rule for meat and poultry beginning in 1997 and ending in 2000,
- increasing food safety funding and coordination through the President's Food Safety Initiative, 1997-2001,
- creating the President's Council on Food Safety and the Joint Institute for Food Safety Research in 1998, and
- issuing the Egg Safety Action Plan in 1999.

This afternoon's session is designed to explore the need for further food safety reforms in four areas: risk assessment, risk management, risk communication, and federal/state relations. Four distinguished speakers will be addressing these topics. Dr. Ian Gardner, Professor of Epidemiology at the School of Veterinary Medicine of the University of California at Davis will speak to the topic of science and risk assessment. Mr. Tom Billy, Administrator of the Food Safety and Inspection Service of USDA will address the topic of risk management. Dr. Scott Ratzan, an expert on risk communication will address that topic. Mr. Doug Saunders of the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services and an officer with the Association of Food and Drug Officials will speak about States' perspectives on food safety reforms. We will hear from each speaker, and then take questions from the audience at the end. I hope in that way to also generate some discussion among the panel as well.

President's Council on Food Safety

The President's Council on Food Safety was established by Executive Order 13100, and remains in effect as an organization to coordinate Federal food safety policies and activities as well as budget development. The Council was tasked to develop a strategic plan which it delivered to President Clinton on January 19, 2001. The Council's second major task is to coordinate budget development which it has done throughout its tenure. The Council's strategic plan contains goals, objectives, and actions; performance measures to assess progress on the plan; an analysis of organizational structures to improve program effectiveness; and an analysis of the need for new legislation to enable the food safety agencies to better protect public health.

The strategic plan's overarching goal is to "protect public health by significantly reducing the prevalence of foodborne hazards, thereby reducing acute and chronic illnesses and injuries through science-based and coordinated regulation, inspection, enforcement, research, and education programs." To accomplish this, three strategic goals are articulated:

- The U.S. food safety system is based on sound science and risk assessment.
- The U.S. system for managing food safety is effective from farm to table.
- The U.S. food safety system openly and effectively provides information on food safety risks and education on how to control those risks for everyone from farm to table.

Our speakers this afternoon will be providing their views of the strategic directions outlined in the plan, and the need for further actions.

In its report to the President, the Council reached conclusions about the current food safety system's organizational structure and legal authorities and makes recommendations for further reforms. The Council found that the existing organizational structure reflects the legislative history of the last 100 years. The dozen agencies with direct and related food safety authority allow for diverse agency input into decisions, but this same structure reduces the Federal government's ability to allocate resources to food safety problems based on the risks that they pose. Furthermore, the fragmented structure also impedes coordination on issues that cut across multiple agencies' jurisdictions such as was encountered with the recent StarLink corn problem.

The Council concluded that reorganization alone will not improve the public health protection now offered by the current structure. Implementing the strategic plan's goals and objectives as well as statutory reforms are needed. The Council also notes that the strategic plan can be implemented under any of the organizational options it considered, and no single organizational structure offers the perfect solution to how best to organize the Federal efforts.

The Council recommends that the new administration develop near-term legislative proposals to strengthen the existing food safety statutes enabling stronger prevention, enforcement, and recordkeeping activities. The Council also recommends that near-term efforts be made to strengthen agency coordination to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of Federal food safety activities. Finally, the Council recommends the development of comprehensive, unifying legislation, followed by the development of a corresponding organizational reform plan that protects the public's health by allowing risk-based allocation of resources and utilization of science-based regulation, enforcement, and education. The comprehensive framework should address food safety standard setting, inspection, enforcement, research, and education. Finally, the Council stressed that no weakening of existing statutory authorities should occur.

The report of the President's Council on Food Safety reflects its members' belief that even though the current Federal food safety system provides a high level of public health protection, it can be strengthened through further food safety reforms. Foodborne illnesses remain a major cost to our society. The numbers of people who are vulnerable to foodborne diseases continue to grow. Food production distribution, and consumption patterns have changed and continue to change posing new food safety problems. Public concern about the safety of food remains high. The Council's report therefore concludes that changing the law and the current organizational structure would further strengthen public health protection and improve the efficiency of the Nation's food safety system.